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Peterson, (Sir) William
A Canadian hospital in France.
1916.

McGILL UNIVERSITY
MONTREAL

ANNUAL UNIVERSITY LECTURE

"A CANADIAN HOSPITAL IN FRANCE"

BY

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PRINCIPAL OF THE UNIVERSITY

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A CANADIAN HOSPITAL IN FRANCE*

Members of Convocation, Undergraduates,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

IT has been customary during recent years to have the Annual University Lecture, which is called for by the Regulations of Corporation, delivered on our Founder's birthday. It ought to have been given on Friday of last week, for Friday was the 6th October and James McGill was born on 6th October, 1744. And if recent usage had been followed, it would have been delivered by some new member of the staff—a rule which has borne excellent fruit in lectures on such extensions of the curriculum as Music, Architecture, Education and other subjects. But McGill has this year no new professors, and no additions to the curriculum: she has enough to do at present in trying to keep herself going on the old lines. And on Friday of last week I had to be in Quebec, so if, in default of any other offers, the lecture was to be given by me, it became obvious that it would have to be postponed.

Our Founder would have been greatly surprised if he could have foreseen what was to happen in the world not much more than a hundred years after his death. When he passed away in 1813, Britain was still at war with Napoleon; to-day she is fighting for France, on French soil, and in the foremost ranks are hundreds of those who bear our Founder's name—the men of Old McGill. The McGill yell is at all times a cry that appeals to us; but to hear it, as I have heard it, in French surroundings gives one a new sense of the far-reaching influence of a well-considered and wisely-directed bequest to education. Truly, James McGill "builded better than he knew." The McGill men who are working and fighting for

* The Annual University Lecture, delivered in the Royal Victoria College, 12th October, 1916.

freedom in France and Flanders may rest assured that if he could be with us to-day, while we are piously celebrating his memory, he would have wished both us and them to continue throwing every ounce of our strength into the struggle. Signs are not wanting that we are now approaching the "beginning of the end," and those who have done their duty in this war, directly or indirectly, will always have the satisfaction of feeling that they and theirs were privileged to take part in the greatest struggle for freedom that the world has ever seen.

It is to me a most gratifying reflection that the war is giving what will amount to a new meaning to the word "academic." In common parlance, academic is supposed to be the very opposite of practical. But just look at the work of our universities in this war. I was speaking to the students at the opening of the session about the (so-called) "academic" contributions to the solution of such practical problems as the testing of munitions, the production of high explosives, the supply of dye-stuffs, the working of aircraft and submarines. Could anything be more practical than that? But there is another field in which, more than in any other, the highest humanitarian interests are linked, with the onward march of science. Medicine and surgery, in this war, and the art of sanitation, are very directly concerned with the relief of suffering and the conservation of human life. Here the term "academic" ought to be re-christened "intensely practical and helpful." The Founder of McGill University would be greatly gratified if he could know that the University Lecture for 1916 is to deal with the work achieved and the reputation gained by a medical unit in France, bearing his name, of which the whole University may well be proud. It is commanded by a very distinguished specialist, a man of considerable military experience, whose highest praise, apart from his proved efficiency as organizer and commanding officer, is that he made the greatest sacrifices, both personal and professional, in order that he might obey the impulse of patriotic devotion. To Colonel Birkett and the officers

under his command may be applied the words of a writer in the London *Times* (15th June, 1916) who, in speaking of the self-sacrifice of Canadian medical men generally, says: "These men have in a real sense given up for their country much that years of labour had made their own. They have in some cases literally cast flourishing practices to the winds, and taken instead the soldier's pay and the soldier's lot with splendid cheerfulness. They have faced an absence from home measured by years—for leave to return to Canada is a very different matter from leave to return to England—without a grumble."

Colonel Birkett's unit, which is known as No. 3 General Hospital (McGill), received instructions to mobilise on 5th March, 1915, and sailed for England on 6th May. After a sojourn of some weeks in camp on St. Martin's Plains it embarked for France in the middle of June. Its first location was at Camiers, where it had the Harvard medical unit for its next-door neighbour. When I visited this site, I saw the tent which had been occupied by our good friend Colonel Yates, whose death was deplored by so many warm friends in Montreal and elsewhere; it was on one side of the Commanding Officer's quarters, while the Clerks and Paymaster were clustered on the other. Camiers is still considered a suitable site for those who are more permanently settled there; but the McGill unit was housed in Indian tents which, though to the outward eye they carried some suggestion of oriental splendour, were not suited to the weather that prevailed in the later months of 1915. So the McGill Hospital was glad of the opportunity to make a move to Boulogne. The transference was effected on 6th January, 1916, under Colonel Elder, who acted for the Commanding Officer during the latter's absence on official business in Canada. When I tell you that the authorities allowed two days for the removal, and that it was completely achieved in eight hours, I give you some proof both of Colonel Elder's energy and of the willing support he received from all ranks of the unit. At Camiers over 3000 patients had been treated; at Boulogne the number

up to the end of July was to be fully 15,000. These figures are an index of the conspicuous success which has attended the operations of the McGill Hospital in the course of its existence, more especially since its removal to Boulogne.

Like many other places on the lines of communication in France, Boulogne presents the outward appearance of a city in English occupation. Except for the indispensable officials, the French uniform is conspicuous by its absence at the front. The defenders of their country are with the armies of the Republic. Khaki is everywhere the only wear, and many who have donned the British uniform—in addition to administrative officials, directors of transportation, and members of various staffs—belong to one or other of the numerous base hospitals, situated in Boulogne or its immediate neighbourhood. At the present moment, Boulogne is one of the great clearance ports of France; and were it not for the transportation activities resulting from this fact, its principal industry might be said to be medicine and surgery.

My visit was made in the middle of August, and I crossed the Channel on one of three transports, convoyed by two destroyers, the first of which curveted about in front of the leading vessel like a dog in front of a baker's van. The dog is generally barking, and no doubt the destroyers would have barked too if any German submarine had been so foolish as to reveal its presence in the near neighbourhood! I was on the leader, and as the officer who, in virtue of his seniority, commanded the troops happened to be a McGill graduate, I had the privilege of being invited to the captain's bridge, from which I felt sure of being able to obtain a good view of anything at all likely to happen. But the "English Channel" is safe and will continue to be so if the Germans fail in their effort to change its name! No danger was encountered, either going or returning, and no hostile vessel put in an appearance. Many of them are known to have come once too often! The story of the Channel nets will be a great one to write when the war is over; it could very well be undertaken by one of McGill's honorary graduates, Mr. Rudyard Kipling,

who knows a good deal about the subject, and has already given the reading public some inkling of what he knows. Near the French coast, a fleet of small fishing boats could be descried, pursuing their ordinary avocations; but the captain called my attention at the same time to vessels of a larger build, which were evidently moving according to a concerted plan, and were trying to catch fish of quite another kind—"tin-fish," the captain said. They were sweeping for mines. As to the sneaking submarine, one method of detecting and afterwards destroying it is the employment of dirigible air-ships, one of which accompanied us on the return trip to Folkestone. It made marvellous speed, and its silver sheen in the summer sky was in marked contrast to the dark scowl of a nocturnal raider. On the way over we met two hospital ships, bringing back the wreckage of war to convalescent homes and other institutions in England. They are easily recognizable by their green paint and red-cross device; and as they passed us, the troops on board our vessel gave a cheer to hearten the poor sufferers on their way to "Blighty." I have seen such cargoes finally unloaded at Waterloo Station, and nothing could surpass the loving care with which they are received, or the respectful and sympathetic demeanour of the crowd as the ambulance vans pass by.

Outside the harbour of Boulogne, one or two wrecks are easily discernible. They once were ships lying peacefully at anchor, but in the night an enemy torpedo had found its mark. Such are the triumphs of Germany by sea! On the quay itself the first thing that strikes the eye is the long array of English and Canadian motor-ambulances, many of them donated by private associations. They are part of an organized medical service, the proved efficiency of which is one of the war's wonders. From the landing stage I made my way, —after paying my respects at the Headquarters of the District Medical Staff—to No. 3 General, where I was somewhat embarrassed to find that the Commanding Officer had given up his own quarters to accommodate me. Our hospital occupies a splendid situation at the back of the town, in

grounds covering several acres, fronting the main road to Calais. The luxuriant foliage which is one of their marked features is matched by the extremely pretty and well-kept beds of flowers which the staff—especially the nursing sisters—have made a point of pride at the entrance to the various huts and elsewhere. The buildings, apart from the huts, are the ruins and remains of an old Jesuit College which was partly destroyed by fire in 1907 and thereafter largely demolished. It had been previously used as an Indian hospital; and the care taken by the British Government of its dusky warriors, even in death, was evidenced by a graveyard and a crematorium, at some distance from our huts, in which the rites of Hindoo burial had been scrupulously observed, and which is intended to be British property for ever.

No. 3 General was originally designed for only 520 beds. Authority was soon given, however, to double that number, and now there are over 2,000 beds—say four times the number of beds in the Montreal General. In the first week of July, after the British had begun their advance, Colonel Birkett and his staff handled no fewer than 5,000 minor casualties; in one single day over 800 patients were admitted, 1,100 discharged, with still over 1,000 remaining in the wards after 6 o'clock that evening. It was on this occasion that Sir Douglas Haig himself sent a special message through Sir Arthur Sloggett, D.G.M.S., congratulating the McGill unit on the unexampled manner in which they had handled unprecedented numbers of casualties.

Word is generally received towards 9 p.m. of what may be expected in the way of convoys of wounded. On the first evening of my visit there must have been a certain "liveliness" at the front, for seventy patients came in. The lighter cases are the first to arrive; they are referred to as "walkers." Then come the "sitters," and last of all the severely wounded, on stretchers. I followed the first patient from the reception room, where his card was made out, complete in every detail, and his case indexed, to the bath, and then to the ward. In

the bath-room the new arrival's kit is carefully rolled up, after his private and personal belongings have been placed in his own safe keeping; it is afterwards put through the disinfector. The patient himself dons hospital garb before entering his ward; but he will get his own kit back when he leaves, or something quite as good. The first care of the attendants, in whom I recognized many students of medicine, is to make the new arrivals comfortable for the night. After the jolting of the railway-train the thing they most need is rest, both for body and spirit; it will be time enough in the morning, in the great majority of cases, to do what may be needful in the way of surgery. And right skilfully do the surgeons carry out their part of the work! In fact it is the great reputation, not only of its Commanding Officer, but of the various departmental heads, and the number and high standing of their assistants, that has given this medical unit the prestige it enjoys in France. The operating theatre is as fully equipped and as ably officered as in any of our largest hospitals, while the X-ray department and the big magnet have proved themselves indispensable for enabling the surgeon to grapple with the difficult and often unique problems forwarded to him from the field of battle. The records show that from January to July of the present year 2,624 operations were performed by the surgical department, with a post-operative mortality of only 2½ per cent. Another interesting and important adjunct of this department is the room in which is housed a large and varied collection of splints. Some of these clever and rapidly improvised inventions owe their existence to the ingenuity of the chief surgeon, who is well known also in civil life for his good work both in hospital and lecture-room, though it looked to me as though only in time of war could his resourcefulness be put fully to the test. From Colonel Elder's colleague in charge of the medical wards I also received much enlightenment as to the general running of the hospital. He is an old campaigner, and nothing interested me more during my whole visit than the account he gave me of how the Canadians had managed

to hold their ground during the second battle of Ypres. For seventeen days and nights on end they kept the Germans off by their artillery fire, though if the enemy had only known how weak their line was and how inadequately supported, they would not have had much difficulty in breaking through. A man is a hero who has lived through such a time as that! This particular hero is known to his friends as a poet. I think he is also something of a philosopher. And Colonel John McCrae's medical work is no less well done because of the distinction he brings to it from other fields. I spent some time in the pathological laboratory, listening to Captain Rhea as he expounded to a visiting inspector, who was none other than our old friend Sir William Leishman, the results of some of his work in connection with typhoid and para-typhoid.

An army marches on its stomach, and no medical or other hospital could be well run without a good kitchen. This and other departments of the administration side, I had the opportunity of inspecting under the guidance of Quartermaster David Law, whose great ability and experience have made him one of the most valuable members of the unit. The daily and weekly expense accounts are kept with military as well as business exactitude, and after studying the various tabulations, I could not but commend the Quartermaster's successful efforts to secure some reduction of expenditure, and to introduce various economies in what is likely to finish as a war of economy all round.

Special mention ought to be made of the work of the McGill Y. M. C. A. Field Branch, which has been untiring in its efforts to provide comforts and recreation for the personnel of the unit. Its operations are conducted in a fine wooden hut, where may be found, in addition to newspapers, magazines and books, all the necessary equipment for games of various kinds—chess, checkers, cards, dominoes and even billiards. Concerts and lectures are given in this hut, which contains also materials for writing and correspondence. A similar hut was donated to the hospital by the Canadian Red Cross Society. It was formally opened on Empire Day, when in the presence

of a number of distinguished visitors a base-ball match was also played between rival teams.

In company with the O.C. and other officers of the unit, I took various trips to the town and its neighbourhood. Boulogne was once a walled city; you can walk round it and count its towers and battlements. The old chateau of the Counts of Boulogne is now used as a barracks, and its chapel, crypt and dungeon are well worthy of a visit. In the last named we created some amusement by asking our French soldier-guide if he did not think it would be a good place for William! Such pleasantries are not ill-timed, for there is a look of sadness about the people, in spite of their grim determination, that contrasts painfully with the usual gaiety of France. It struck me that two out of every three of the women were wearing black. This was sadly evident when one of the factories opened its doors for the midday meal. In the near neighbourhood of this factory are the headquarters of the Canadian Red Cross in France, under Major Blaylock, a graduate of McGill. Here are stored all the multifarious supplies which reach Boulogne both from Canada and from London. What an amount of loving care and foresight on the part of the workers and contributors throughout the world is represented in these stores! Nothing seems to be lacking, either in the way of medical and surgical supplies or creature comforts. The need is so great that in the month of July the contents represented a value of half a million of dollars. And no matter how full the warehouses may be, their whole contents are cleared out and have to be renewed on an average once a month. Let the workers in Canada and elsewhere continue their angelic efforts in the full confidence that every ounce of the goods they supply reaches its mark, and that here, as in everything else I was privileged to witness, the work of administration is above criticism. I must not forget the nursing-sisters, of whom our unit can boast over seventy. A quiet tea in their delightful mess-room reminded me of many acquaintanceships, and I afterwards had the pleasure of addressing them, along with the whole staff and

all the student-assistants, and many convalescents too. I congratulated the members of the staff on their work, and gave reasons for my belief that we had now entered on the last phase of the war. When it was over, I said, things could never be again as they had been before. The war had made our Empire more conscious of itself, and Canadians would wish to take every right method of developing and intensifying the new feeling of pride in their imperial partnership. And specially would the men who returned from the front, where they had been so long in daily touch with the issues of life and death, desire in their subsequent careers to play a useful part as Canadian citizens. They would find it impossible to become wholly or selfishly engrossed with their own private affairs. They would not be willing to sit with arms folded while the business of a great city, for example, was carried on in a way that brings the blush of shame to every honest cheek. Rather would they wish to take more than their personal and inevitable share of work and responsibility. Let them return to Canada eager to exemplify, and to impress upon others, the maxim that public office is a public trust. Let them see to it that there shall be no room in future, whether in municipal or in federal affairs, for crookedness and corruption, that the self-seeker and the time-server shall be sent about his business, and that government for the public good shall be the aim and object of all who hold any kind of office. It was quite within the range of possibility, I concluded, apart altogether from any marked revival of religion, that the greater moral earnestness inspired in the hearts of those who have played the part of heroes in this war, the cultivation of a "quiet sense of duty," and the stern lessons of service and sacrifice they have learnt, would do much to elevate and purify the national life of the Dominion.

On one of my excursions into the town of Boulogne itself, I took the opportunity of going over both a hospital ship and a hospital train. Many of the former make the longer run to Southampton, and it is difficult to understand how the Germans can ever have failed to recognize their distinctive marks,

either by night or by day. Yet we know that some of them have "come to grief," to use the euphemistic expression by which the enemy seeks to cloak his worst performances. On the hospital ship, the most interesting feature—apart from the medical and surgical equipment—is the system of "lifts" by which patients on stretchers are lowered into the wards and again brought up from them on deck. At the railway station, an empty hospital train was drawn up on one side of the platform, consisting of long corridor carriages, each with 38 beds, and fitted out with medicines and hospital supplies of every kind. There was even an operating table for cases of secondary hemorrhage. On the other side of the same platform, another train was just ready to start for the front, full to overflowing of radiant humanity,—Royal Highlanders and Australians, eager for the fray, and evidently without much thought of the possibilities indicated by the presence of the hospital train opposite. Such are life's contrasts!

I visited also most of the other hospitals in Boulogne and neighbourhood, all doing splendid work on similar lines. At Etaples, for example, it was specially interesting to find another of our McGill men in command—Colonel Wylde, with Professor J. Alex. Hutchison for his chief surgeon. In another hospital I actually had the opportunity of meeting and talking with a group of German wounded prisoners, whose quarters seemed to have been carefully selected so as to give them a good view of the shipping which constantly passes between France and that country which they fondly believed —because they had been told—had been quite sealed up by German submarines. All these hospitals are deserving of the highest praise. But none of them brought things so near to my heart as did my visit to the unit which I have made the subject of this sketch. On the last day of my stay, two men were brought in belonging to a Canadian regiment to which I had bidden good-bye but a short week previously at Bramshott. They had already received their baptism of fire. And they told me that one of their officers, personally known to me, had fallen a victim to a German shell which had caught their

last platoon just as they were leaving the trenches. I see him before me now as I grasped his hand at Liphook station, and told him that when I got back to Montreal I would tell his mother I had seen the last of him. Poor mother, and father, too! I have not yet been able to bring myself even to write to them.

All the hospitals, as I have said, are doing most magnificent work. What seems to differentiate them, in some degree, from the McGill unit is the fact that the latter is a University hospital, officered by a large staff of specialists, whose high standing and power of co-ordinating science and medicine have given it almost a place apart. It was little wonder to me, and no small joy, to hear it described by three of the highest authorities, speaking separately and in different centres, as the "best unit in France."